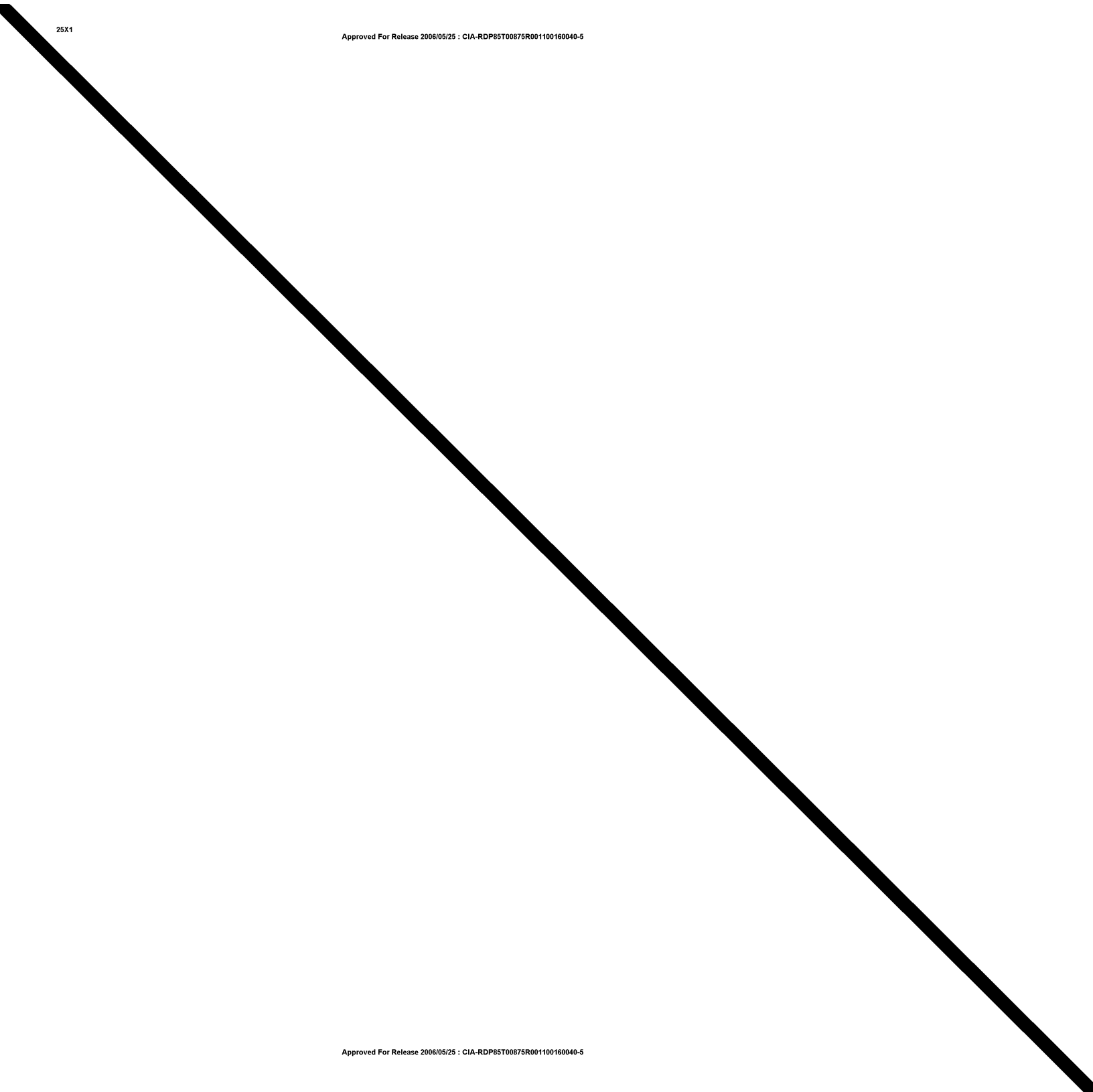

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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

The Lao Communists

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12 March 1973
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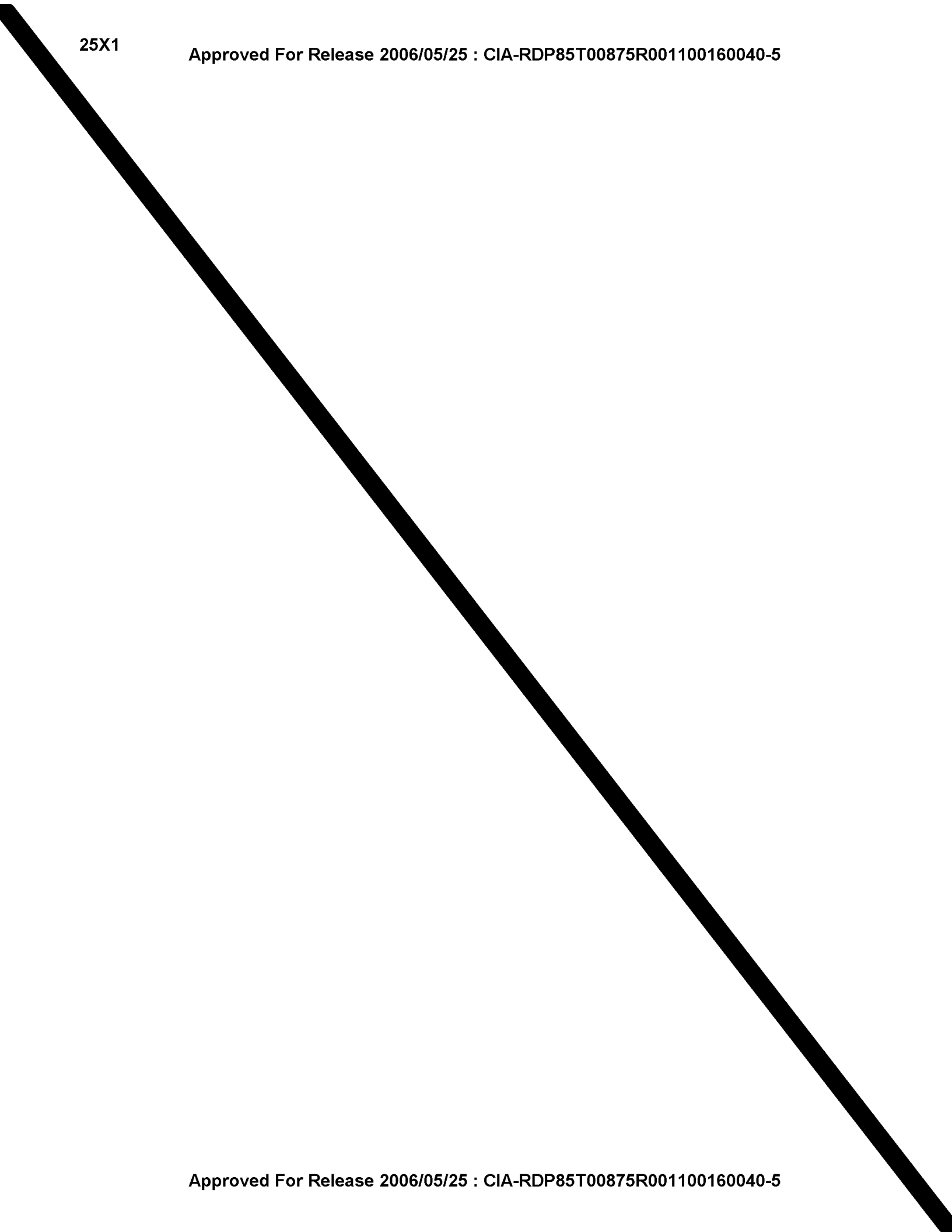

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12 March 1973

The Lao Communists

Summary

For the third time since the Lao Communist movement was launched in 1950, Pathet Lao leaders are preparing to enter a coalition government in Vientiane. The Communists approach the prospect of a return to peaceful competition with some confidence. They not only have survived more than ten years of war, but also have managed to strengthen their movement significantly. The Communists control approximately three fifths of Laos and a quarter to a third of its 3,000,000 people. With the assistance of their North Vietnamese allies, they have constructed a reasonably efficient administrative system based at the Communist headquarters near Sam Neua. Communist popular support is difficult to judge from the limited evidence available, but by most accounts, the Pathet Lao administrators have performed well, especially when compared to the less efficient administrators out of Vientiane.

The peace agreement of February 1973 allotted the Lao Communists half the portfolios in a new provisional government. Much bargaining remains to be done on the details of the political accord, and the Communists can be expected to hold out for at least some of the key cabinet posts denied them in previous coalitions. Once in office, they will probably turn their efforts to building political strength in areas controlled by the government in preparation for the national elections that will establish a permanent government.

The factionalism and inefficiency in non-Communist ranks may give the Pathet Lao an edge in the coming political competition. The key to assessing the prospects in Laos, however, lies in the capabilities of neither the Lao Communists nor their rivals. Decisions taken in Hanoi will have a large part in determining how well the arrangements work. Hanoi, the ultimate authority shaping Pathet Lao strategy, is primarily interested in Laos as it relates to South Vietnam.

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The Birth of the Lao Communists

The Lao Communist movement really got started on 13 August 1950 when a "National Resistance Congress" of some 150 anti-French Lao under the aegis of Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh met to form a provisional government. The congress issued a manifesto signed "Pathet Lao"— literally, "Lao State." (The Communists have long since discarded the name Pathet Lao, but others still use the term to denote the movement.)

The participants at the congress, all closely associated with the Vietnamese Communists, were divided into two main groups. One segment was a small splinter from the original anti-French Lao nationalist movement known as Lao Issara (Free Lao). Most Issara leaders, including Souvanna Phouma, had ended their ineffectual exile in Bangkok in 1949 and returned to Laos to cooperate with the French in an evolutionary move toward independence. A minority, aristocrats like Souvanna's half brother Souphanouvong, had cast their lot with the Viet Minh and armed revolution. A number of these privileged revolutionaries were motivated by personal ambition; they saw Souphanouvong and the North Vietnamese as the winning side. The second segment at the congress in 1950 was a group of commoners, including Nouhak Phoumsavan and Kaysone Phomvihane, who had spent time in eastern Laos organizing resistance bands to assist the Viet Minh. They had no natural claim to authority and were totally dependent on the Vietnamese.

In contrast with their Viet Minh mentors, the Lao Communists could count on little popular support in their own country. Even with Ho Chi Minh's help, they were able to mobilize only about 3,000 troops to fight for Laotian independence, and these for the most part played only a support role for tough Vietnamese Communist outfits that thrust deeply into Laos. At the Geneva Conference of 1954 the Vietnamese Communists initially sought representation for the "Pathet Lao resistance government," but later dropped the demand in return for concessions in Vietnam. The Geneva Accord of 1954 provided for the regrouping of Pathet Lao forces in Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces "pending a political settlement." Shortly thereafter, the Vietnamese withdrew from Laos to concentrate on consolidating their own newly won independence. Their Lao comrades were left largely on their own in the contest for political power.

Reconciliation Comes and Goes

The Lao part of the 1954 Geneva Accord required months of tedious negotiations between the neutralist Souvanna and the leftist Souphanouvong. In November 1957, the two finally agreed to form a coalition

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government with Souvanna as prime minister. The Communists got two cabinet posts and the right to contest National Assembly elections scheduled in 1958. Government officials and administrators were admitted into Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces, and some 1,500 Pathet Lao troops surrendered their weapons and offered to reintegrate into the Royal Lao Army.

This promising beginning came to an end when the Pathet Lao were too successful in operating within the newly created political system. The non-Communists, plagued by personal ambitions and mutual antagonisms, were unable to present a united slate in the National Assembly elections in May 1958. As a result, the Communists and their allied party stuck together and won 13 of the 21 seats contested even though they polled only slightly more than 20 percent of the vote.

This was too much for right-wing Laotians. In July, they marshaled a majority in the assembly and voted out the Souvanna government. To replace Souvanna, they chose Phoui Sananikone, who, though professing to follow Souvanna's neutralist international policy, soon established ties with Taiwan and the Diem regime in Saigon. Phoui was intent on moving against the Lao Communists. In February 1959, he repudiated the Geneva Accords, and in May the Royal Lao Army attempted to arrest the two Pathet Lao battalions that were scheduled for integration. At the same time, the police rounded up the Lao Communist political leaders in Vientiane—including Souphanouvong and six others—and slapped them in jail, where they remained until they escaped in 1960.

It has been argued that without this right-wing intervention, the Lao Communists might have drifted away from the North Vietnamese and remained within the Lao political system. This is doubtful since political developments in Laos have continually been entangled with Vietnamese Communist ambitions. At about the time the Geneva Accords were scuttled in Laos, the North Vietnamese were deciding to move into a period of armed struggle in South Vietnam. In May 1959, North Vietnamese troops began to move into the hills of eastern Laos to secure the Ho Chi Minh trail system and north into northern Laos to assist and direct the Pathet Lao in military operations against the Vientiane government.

A year later developments took a surprising turn, one that was disconcerting to both the Communists and the government in Vientiane. A coup led by an idealistic young paratrooper, Captain Kong Le, returned Souvanna and his neutralist faction to power in Vientiane. Claiming they were allied with the neutralists, the Lao forces, who were rearmed by the Soviet Union, together with the North Vietnamese substantially increased their territorial

holdings. By the time the fighting was suspended in 1962, they had gained control of well over half the country.

In 1961 and 1962, under pressure from the big powers, the Lao parties met simultaneously at several places in Laos as well as in Switzerland. In June the three factions announced they had reached agreement on a tripartite government- rightist, neutralist, leftist. Once again Souvanna was in charge. Under the terms of this second Geneva Accord, all foreign advisers, except the French, were to be withdrawn, and the International Control Commission restored. Reunification of the Laotian armed forces was left to later negotiations.

Leaders of the Second Coalition Government:
Boun Oum, Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong

This second attempt at national reconciliation quickly disintegrated. In Vientiane, the assassination of Quinim Pholsena, a Communist-inclined neutralist who was foreign minister in the tripartite cabinet, led Souphanouvong and his confreres to leave Vientiane and participation in the government. The same month Pathet Lao troops assisted dissident neutralists in a move against Kong Le, who supported Souvanna and was occupying the Plaine des Jarres. By the end of the year, Kong Le's forces had abandoned the entire Plaine. This near-destruction of Souvanna's neutralist underpinning completed the polarization of Lao politics and set the stage for a decade of fighting in Laos that did not end until the cease-fire last month.

The Political Machine

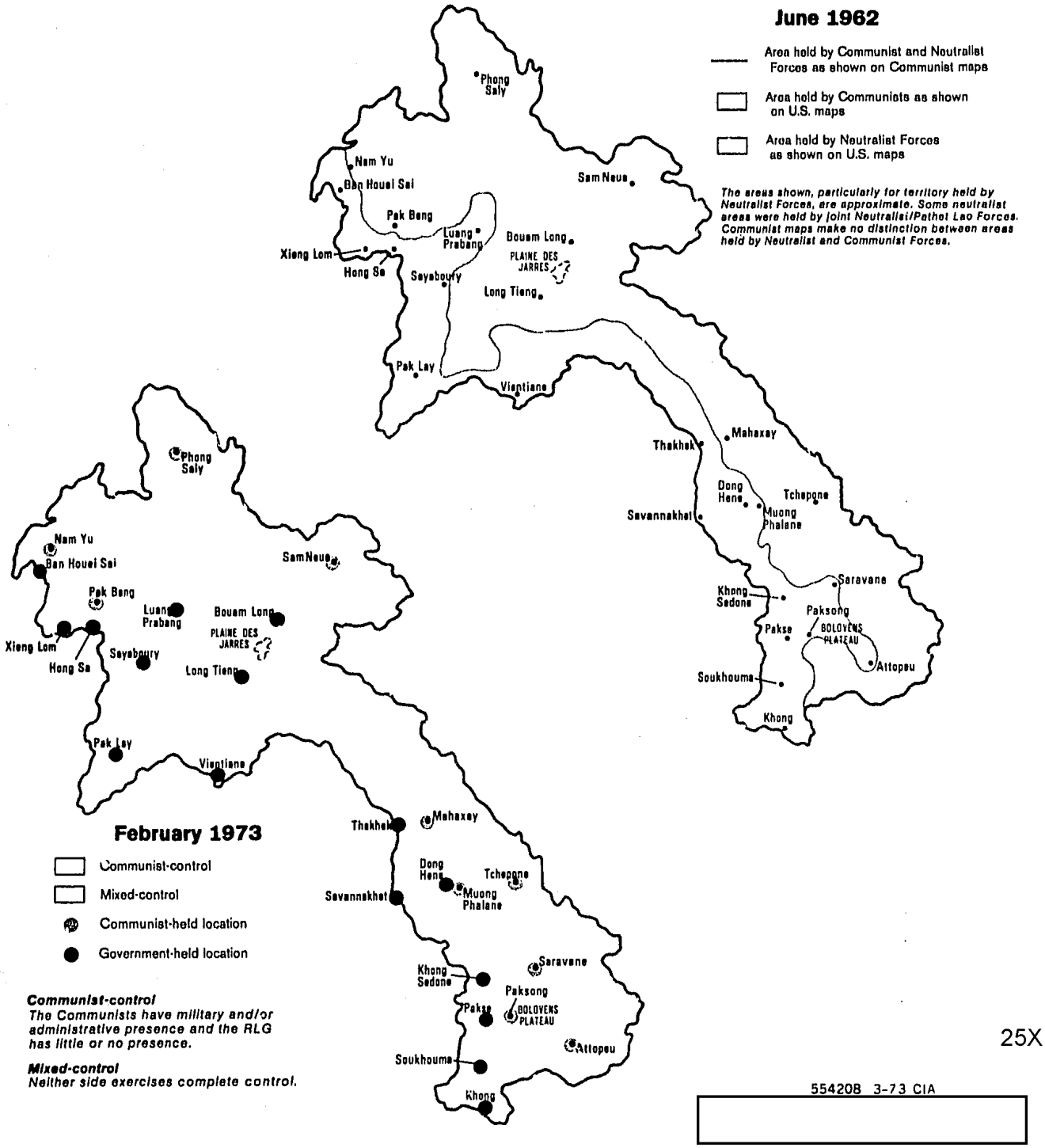
Since 1956, the Lao Patriotic Front headed by Souphanouvong has been the Communists' overt political and administrative organization. All Communist statements are issued under its masthead and it is the Communist organization that negotiates with the Vientiane government. The Lao Patriotic Front will make up the left wing of the coalition government now being negotiated. Over the years the Communists have expended a considerable effort to give the impression that all social, ethnic, and religious groups in Laos support the Front by setting up a phalanx of affiliated special interest groups, such as peasants, women, teachers, youth, and tribal organizations.

The motivating force of Lao communism, however, is not the Lao Patriotic Front, but a small well-disciplined Communist party—the Lao Peoples' Party, which was formed in March 1955 after several false starts. According to a Vietnamese Communist document, it originally consisted of 600 Lao members of the former Indochina Communist Party. Today, the party is believed to have some 15,000 to 20,000 members. It has tried to hide behind the facade of the Patriotic Front to avoid tainting the Front's image with an ideology that many Lao find incompatible with Buddhist principles. Nevertheless, the existence of the party is an open secret; Communist broadcasts and publications refer to it as the "revolutionary party."

In classic Communist fashion, the party's chain of command is indistinguishable from that of the Front; party members occupy virtually all positions of leadership both in the Front and in the armed forces. The party reportedly has at least a rudimentary organization in all areas of Laos, including areas under government control.

The composition and ranking of the top leadership are more carefully guarded secrets than the party's structure. It is generally believed that Prince Souphanouvong, chairman of the Lao Patriotic Front and titular head of the Lao left, is a party member and may even be included within its 15-member Central Committee. Souphanouvong, however, is outranked by Central Committee chairman Kaysone Phomvihane and his deputy, Nouhak Phoumsavan. After these two, little is known about the party pecking order. Several other members almost certainly outrank Souphanouvong. Phoumi Vongvichit, who has conducted the recent private peace talks with Souvanna in Vientiane, is regarded by many as the third ranking Lao Communist, but others give this spot to Phoune Sipraseuth, the chairman of the Communist negotiating delegation.

LAOS: Communist Controlled Areas



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The one aspect of the shadowy Lao Communist leadership that is reasonably clear is its special relationship with the North Vietnamese Communists. Although close party relations are maintained with both Peking and Moscow, it is Hanoi whose influence is overriding within the Lao Communist movement. The careers of both Kaysone and Nouhak, for example, have been closely entwined with the Vietnamese Communist movement. Both were members of the parent Indochina Communist Party by the early 1940s, and both make frequent trips from their headquarters at Sam Neua to Hanoi for consultations.

The Communist "Neutralists"

Another significant component of the Lao Communist movement is the "Alliance Committee of the Patriotic Neutralist Forces." A unique feature of the Lao political landscape, it grew out of Communist efforts to absorb and control the disparate political and military organizations that broke away from Souvanna's neutralist faction in the early 1960s. On the military side, the alliance includes units of Colonel Deuane Sounnarath, a Kong Le man prior to 1963, and General Khamouane Boupha, the warlord of Phong Saly Province, who threw in his lot with the Communists in the same year. On the political side are representatives of the Santhiphab Penkang (Peace and Neutrality) Party, which has been allied with the Communists since the late 1950s, and a few former followers of Souvanna. At first, these personally ambitious free spirits resisted Communist efforts to fuse them into a single political organization, but by 1969, the "Patriotic Neutralists" had been hammered into shape. They are not a serious political or military force in today's polarized politics, but they have provided the rationale for the Communist effort to undermine Souvanna's reputation as a neutralist.

The Grass Roots

The Lao Communists control nearly two thirds of the land area and about a quarter to a third of the population of Laos. Some areas were recently added while others—such as Sam Neua Province—have been under the Communists for a decade or more. In addition, the Communists hold sway in enclaves of villages in areas controlled primarily by the government, just as the government maintains enclaves in Communist areas. More than 80 percent of the people under Communist control are non-ethnic Lao. With few exceptions, these tribesmen have had little to do with any regime in Vientiane, and their relations with the lowland Lao have always been poor.

The Communists' basic political objective is to impose Marxist-Leninism on Lao society. Given their close connections with Hanoi, the product

they aim at is presumably close to the North Vietnamese model. So far, the drive toward their ideal has of necessity been a slow one. The leadership has been preoccupied with waging a war; and the real problems of imposing a Communist model on a backward economy and a primitive society have been side-stepped.

At least in some areas the Communists are trying to "modernize" Laotian society by challenging some of the traditional ways and by providing basic services in health and education. Their efforts often seem to have little to do with Communist orthodoxy. In education, for example, the emphasis is on nationalism, equality of minority groups, and honesty. Little is said about Marxism or revolution.

The Pathet Lao propaganda apparatus is highly developed and fills the air with reports of literacy campaigns, health drives, successful agricultural endeavors, and increased output. The claims are impossible to check, but given the time and attention the Communists devote to talking about these endeavors, there must be some movement.

At least some of the credit for what seems to be a relatively efficient Pathet Lao administration belongs to the North Vietnamese. Vietnamese political and technical advisers are present in Lao Communist provincial capitals and in many of the districts. Many Lao Communist officials are reportedly heavily dependent on these advisers and seldom make important decisions without consulting them.

It is impossible to say with any assurance how receptive the public is to these Communist programs and administration. The war directly or indirectly has been responsible for many of the complaints voiced by refugees from Communist areas. Most cite fear of air strikes and the mole-like existence to which many were reduced. Others grumble about heavy rice taxation and forced labor to support Pathet Lao military forces.

Some complaints stem from Communist efforts to reform society. Many older Lao are offended by the emphasis on youth and have little sympathy for programs that violate Lao tradition. Refugees do comment favorably on Pathet Lao administration. Some give the Communists good marks for their effort to improve literacy and agricultural techniques; many who have lived five years or longer in the "liberated zone" commend Pathet Lao troops for good behavior and Communist civil servants for honesty.

Unenthusiastic Soldiers

From the nucleus of some 3,000 Lao who assisted the Viet Minh in fighting the French in 1953 and 1954, the military arm of the Lao Communist movement—now known as the Lao People's Liberation Army—has grown to a force of about 20,000. In general, the command structure parallels the civilian apparatus. Battalions and independent companies are subordinate to regional headquarters. (The Lao Communists do not have combat units larger than battalions). The districts and villages control some part-time troops, but these are lightly armed, largely untrained, and used primarily for home defense.

The North Vietnamese have lavished considerable attention on their Lao military brethren. Numerous Lao officers have traveled to North Vietnam to receive training. North Vietnamese advisers have assisted in officer training within Laos. North Vietnamese advisers serve with most Lao battalions and many independent companies. These advisers generally have been dedicated professionals carefully chosen for their political and military reliability and ready to take full responsibility for the performance of their units.

Despite this effort, Hanoi has failed to create an indigenous force capable of bearing the brunt of the fighting. In fact, both sides in the Laos conflict have been forced to admit that they were unable to build reliable Lao regular forces. The government came eventually to rely on tribal irregulars heavily dependent on US air power for logistic and direct combat support for most of their military punch. The North Vietnamese had to import large numbers of their own main force units to protect areas of vital interest to them—the Plaine des Jarres and the hills to the north and east, and, most important, the eastern panhandle and the infiltration corridor to South Vietnam.

With very few exceptions, Lao Communist units have been no match for the US-supported irregulars. Lao Communist battalions have done well against Royal Lao Army units, but as a rule when these forces confront one another, neither side is anxious for a fight and a local, de facto cease-fire usually is worked out.

Because of their lack of military prowess, most units of the Lao People's Liberation Army are assigned to local security and social control tasks. Specifically, they are charged with enforcing the stringent restrictions

imposed on civilians in the "liberated zone." For example, Lao Communist units are supposed to prevent the movement of refugees to government-controlled areas. Travel restrictions imposed by the civilian apparatus—often involving an elaborate system of passes—are enforced by these military units. The Lao People's Liberation Army is responsible for collecting rice taxes from the villages (or providing guards for civilian tax collectors), and Lao military teams travel throughout the countryside to distribute propaganda and keep villagers from consorting with government officials.

Again into the Political Arena

The provisional cease-fire announced on 20 February 1973 is the third Lao settlement in 16 years, and the future it projects is familiar to all long-time observers of the Lao political scene. As the first order of business, the two sides will have to flesh out the outlines of the political accord. The agreement is to have a new provisional government formed by 23 March. The key issue is the distribution of cabinet portfolios, and the bargaining will be hard. The agreement gives the Communists half of the seats in a new cabinet. In 1962, the Pathet Lao received only four of 19 places and the ones they got were of marginal importance: the Ministry of Information, Publicity, and Tourism; the Ministry of Economic Planning; the Secretary of State for Economic Planning; and the Secretary of State for Public Works and Transport. The Communists will not be satisfied with minor portfolios this time around. Souvanna hopes to keep the ministries of defense, interior, and education, but he is reportedly willing to concede foreign affairs—which in 1962 was given to Quinim Pholsena, a left-leaning neutralist.

The problem of international supervision is another familiar difficulty confronting the Lao negotiators. The February agreement provides only that the International Control Commission will continue along the lines of the 1962 Geneva Accords, but Souvanna seems anxious to increase the commission's power to monitor the cease-fire and supervise the withdrawal of foreign troops. He has been pushing for teams to be stationed in all areas of the country. After the 1962 accords the Communists refused to allow any sort of meaningful supervision, and they seem to hold to this view. They will be especially opposed to teams in areas of vital interest, such as the Ho Chi Minh supply corridor. The neutralization of Luang Prabang and Vientiane called for in the agreement will be another subject of debate. The Communists can be expected to seek guarantees against the harassment they suffered from the right-wing during the two previous coalition experiments.

If the past is any guide, Lao Communist officials will waste little time in consolidating their political gains. In both 1957 and 1962 the Communist cabinet ministers were efficient and innovative relative to some of their non-Communist colleagues. Souphanouvong, for example, instituted monthly accounting and progress reports in his ministry—radical developments for Laos.

As they set up shop in Vientiane, the Communists will begin to focus on building popular support throughout Laos in preparation for the general elections called for in the agreement. Since no more than a third of the country's population resides in territory controlled by the Pathet Lao, the Communists have a lot of campaigning to do. They did well in the 1957 general elections and can be expected to work hard to strengthen their political organization and to proselytize outside the "liberated zone"—particularly in areas where government control is weak.

How successful will they be? Much of the credit for the present quality of the Pathet Lao administrative and political structure must go to the North Vietnamese. As noted, many Pathet Lao officials are accustomed to taking direction and are reluctant to take the initiative without consulting the North Vietnamese. Without direct North Vietnamese participation, which could prove embarrassing or even counter-productive, the effectiveness of Pathet Lao political effort in the countryside is problematical.

The key, then, to the prospects for Laos will not be the actions and intentions of the Lao Communists and the government. Hanoi is the ultimate authority shaping Pathet Lao strategy, and how well the arrangements set up in February work is largely a decision for the North Vietnamese.

As in the past, Hanoi's actions in Laos will be governed by its requirements in South Vietnam. The unaggressive Pathet Lao military forces have done little real fighting in recent years, and, if left alone, they will probably live up to the terms of the cease-fire. Full compliance by the North Vietnamese is less certain. As long as Hanoi feels the need to send men and supplies to South Vietnam, it will make every effort to maintain and protect its infiltration corridor through Laos. Even if the trails are mothballed, the North Vietnamese would still have to keep some military forces in Laos. In this case, the Pathet Lao will not be likely to undertake any meaningful integration of the territory, armed forces, or administrative structures involved. The February peace document acknowledges that both sides will maintain their respective "zones of control" for an indefinite period.

Although a speedy reunification of Laos is not a realistic expectation, the way is open for a period of relatively peaceful political competition. The Communists enter the contest with a number of advantages. Their opposition, split into quarreling political factions, is held together largely by the force of personality of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. The willingness and ability of the 71-year-old Souvanna to continue to play this leadership role are critical. His removal from the scene might lead to confusion on the non-Communist side. The Pathet Lao, on the other hand, will benefit from a significantly enlarged share of political responsibility in political programs, and a sense of unity and dedication. These strengths, combined with a better grasp of the need for grassroots political effort and effective local administration, give the Lao Communists the edge. Perhaps as much for non-Communist weakness as for their own abilities, the Pathet Lao have reason to be optimistic.

A Basic Chronology

1950	August	Communist "National Resistance Congress"
1954	April	Geneva Conference ends Indochina war
1956	January	Lao Patriotic Front founded
1957	November	Final agreement on coalition government
1958	May	Communists win 13 of 21 seats in National Assembly elections
	July	Souvanna government voted out
1960	August	Kong Le coup
1961	May	Geneva Conference on Laos opens
	October	Lao leaders agree to establish coalition government
1962	June	Coalition government including the Communists is formed
	July	Geneva Accords signed
1963	March	Fighting among neutralists on the Plaine des Jarres begins
	April	Assassination of Quinim Pholsena - Souphanouvong and colleagues leave Vientiane
1973	February	Cease-fire agreement